An Inaugural Dissertation on the Secale Cornutum

By
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of
Virginia

Le Desir de decouvrir le vrai, doit être dirigé dans sa marche par un grand nombre d'expériences.
Pouteau, Melanges de Chirurgie

Philadelphia
1824

Mr Briscoe was permitted to pass on condition of writing a new thesis wh shall be approved

W. E. H.

A Dissertation

There appears to be no study which affords such a variety of discoveries towards the alleviation of mankind, and indeed there are but few subjects received in the bosom of the medical world with a greater warmth than those which present investigations of plants &c.

Such investigations, therefore of the articles of the Materia Medica are even necessary for the advancement of Medical Knowledge, and never should it cease perplexing the ingenuity of physicians while such inquiries are crowned with success; and indeed the happy result of their labours and

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a knowledge of their proving a source of alleviation to a fellow creature should be a sufficient stimulus to encourage the advancement of such investigations. In perusing the Catalogue of names, of which the Materia Medica consists. I know none which could be selected, would suit better for extending such an inquiry or one more deserving and worthy of an investigation than the topic of this dissertation; which is known throughout France by the title of Ergot or in England and this Country, Spurred Rye, horned Rye &c.
It is with diffidence I undertake this subject, though not with the expectation to tender any thing new, but merely with a

desire of gaining the point of usefulness my wishes anticipate, which will be a sufficient compensation in the line of reward.

Upon this topic, which has so recently been investigated, much has been said — the ideas of a puzzled imagination penned, and the pleasing facts of well earned experiments sketched — therefore I shall proceed and endeavour to show that my imagination has not sanctioned a phantom for reality as it proceeded. It would be folly to enter into a discussion purposely to show the difference of opinion entertained by professional men upon this subject, or endeavour to prove with plausibility the inconsistancy

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Therefore I shall commence with the view of pointing out its medical properties and not with that of advancing any new theory with respect to the natural history of this singular production. I shall consequently endeavour to proceed and treat of the natural history and medical properties of this singular article of the Materia Medica.

The knowledge of some of the graniverous plants being liable to a disease scientifically called Clavus has long existed. And indeed, it would appear that the rye is peculiarly liable to take on this morbid con

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=dition", in the low damp soils of England as well as this Country This singular excrescence is at present supposed to arise from a mushroom of the genus scle=rotium like the several sorts of smut or blight. Very diffe=rent ~~hair~~ been the opinions advanced by different writers upon this subject. It was the opinion of Tessot, that this sing=ular and extraordinary prod=uction arose from an irregu=lar vegetation between the grain and leaf, and according to other authors from a puncture of an insect, while others again with equal zeal advocate the doc=trine of fermentation and

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contagion, and indeed the exper
iments made, in support of the
latter, with single grains of rye
by the Abbe Fontana would seem
with some plausibility to convey
the idea, that it did arise from
such a source. But the more
correct conjecture as to the orig
-in of this article, is that, which
I have forwarded, as advanced by
De Condolle. As I have already stat
-ed, some of the graniferous plants
are subject to this disease, partic
-ularly the rye, and the singular
production termed Ergot is form
which we may generally find pro
-jecting from the leaves of the
spike or ear; it is a long curved
excrescence, resembling the spur

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of a cock, with two or three (more generally three) longitudinal de=pressions, with as many correspond=ing elevations; rather more pointed at one extremity than the other, of a dark brown colour externally, white or grey within, of an unpleasant taste and smell and in texture somewhat brittle. The ear or in more popular la=nguage, the heads of the rye are by this sin=gular article more or less occupied, which may readily be seen projecting from it, throughout the field; which however is more abundantly found near its mar=gin, and particularly where, through negli=gence great quantities have been wa=sted. From observation it is well known, a rich moist soil as well as wet seasons, succeeded by hot suns are

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particularly favourable to its production.

Having concluded my observations upon the Natural history of the Article I propose now to proceed with the view of treating of the Medical properties of this singular production, together with its use in the practice of Midwifery &c.

Medical Properties &c

Having said all that appears to be necessary with respect to the natural history of the article, I shall proceed to enquire into its medical properties. The utility of this article, it would appear, to have been first announced to the Public by Doctr. John Stearns of Saratoga

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Country, in a letter to Doctr. Akerly, of New York in which the article is extolled for its powers "ad partum accelerandum". Though great credit is evidently due to America, for the many interesting facts she has unfolded, yet it is not less true, that France claims originality. It was no doubt earlier employed in that Country as a remedy for the promotion of labour; but it seems not to have been conducted with any judgement or propriety and consequently ceased after a short time

Midwifery being the art of facilitating the exit of the child and its appertenances, from the womb of its mother; though this operation is not unfrequently performed by

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the natural force of the organs of the woman, yet from its being so laborious and painful, physicians have made it their particular subject of enquiry, and indeed, it is one which should engage the attention of the most distinguished of the Medical profession.

An article to accelerate the process of parturition has long been wished for, and at length the labours of the Amteliocs have been crowned with success; and for such a discovery the Name of Stearns will ever stand as a monument, in token of his usefulness and eminence.

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been recommended and had recourse to, previous to this article being made known to the public. The sufferings of women, while experiencing that "pleas=ing pain which they delight to bear" have induced physicians to seek a method, in which they could be soothed and rendered less painful; Among I have stated a variety have been in agitation. Amongst the first, it appears that manual and instrumental, and the man, says Dr. Bard, "who boasts of his skill in the latter is truly a dangerous person", though the latter of these resource=es have been of great utility yet it should never shield that superiority, which the subject of this dissertation is so deser=

vidly entitled to. Since the in-
troduction of this article into
the practice of Midwifery, the
Forceps, once so popular and
so frequently had recourse to,
remains now, idle and inactive.

Several years have elapsed sin-
ce the renewal of this article into
practice and from the circumstance
of its causing abortion, clearly
proves its capability of producing
strong contraction of the uterus, and
consequently highly useful in prom-
oting labour; and indeed unimpreg-
nated females, it appears, do not
escape its action; for when administ-
ered to them, nausea, uneasiness
about the uterine region and a sli-
ght spasmodic affection is felt thro-

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throughout the alimentary canal. The same kind of spasmodic affection attack the male, as well as the female and at the same space of time from its exhibition. To prevent the mother from experiencing great pain, which might be given unnecessarily, much caution in the use of this article is particularly requisite. For should not the best parts comm- and that attention which certainly should be paid to them, previous to the exhibition of the article; the mother would no doubt suff- er severely from the pain brought on by this medicine, and probably might be compelled to experience the horror of a Ruptured Uterus; inflicted by

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the spear of imprudence; all of which might have been prevented, had caution been used in prescribing the medicine.

Therefore we should never proceed to administer the article, previous to an examination of the os tincæ and obtaining that knowledge over necessary - the situating of the head of the child, for should it prove a preternatural presentation, it would be totally impracticable for any assistance to prove successful, and as I have stated above great might be the danger, from the violent contractions of the uterus brought on by the article.

In the administration of this medicine there are circumstances which should guide us, if we wish

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for a favourable result, and unless they are attended to particularly, we may expect confusion and disappointment forever to attend us. Therefore in the administration of the Ergot we must attend to the following Circumstances which we should never loose sight of.— Should from any Cause, whatever the contractile powers of the Uterus be distroyed or suspended after having once existed and the soft parts yielding, with a dilated os Tincæ, ruptured membranes, and the head of the Child presenting fairly, causing a Considerable Tumour within the perinæum, we may expect the most favourable termination from the administration of this Article. And

we may have the happiness to see it prove equally as successful when the pains are not sufficiently active and extermit, the soft parts being in a sufficient state of relaxation By a strict observance to the rules laid down, we would avoid many serious Consequences which would prove irksome and dangerous.

Should in the pursuit of our labours, a case occur, where postponement would prove of a serious nature, in Consequence of the rigidity and unyeldiny state of the soft parts, we should at once set aside doubtful deliberations and have recourse to the Lancet; by thus pursuing the path of well earned experience, we would at once relax

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by venaesection, parts which were before red and hard, and pave the way for the administration of our never too highly esteemed medicine.
How essentially necessary does it appear then, from the above circumstances, that we should possess a perfect knowledge of the state of the soft parts, before prescribing the article. Should the first bleeding not suffice and the pulse admit of a second, it should be had recourse to; but a repetition of it is rarely or ever necessary.
After we have attained the object in view by venaesection, we should then proceed to administer a dose of the Secale Cornutum; the mode being both simple and convenient. The most customary way in which I have seen

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it prescribes, is, to ~~infuse~~ from twenty to thirty grains, in a small quantity of water, the dose seldom exceeding the latter quantity. Should this quantity, however, not have the desired effect, the dose should be repeated in ten or fifteen minutes, in which time the Uterus is excited into strong and severe contractions which continue with little or no intermission for a short time; when at once, it seems as it were, to resign the conflict. And it is no less true, where there exists great prostration of strength, the Ergot, as has been ascertained, by repeated trials, to have proved as useless and as inefficacious in promoting the contraction of the Uterus, as though it had never been administered; partic

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ucarly in a case, which came under my own observation, in which I gave repeated doses to satisfy myself of the certainly of its ineffecacy, at such a period. Some physicians, who like Cullen placing but little confidence in the virtues of any article of the Materia Medica, appears to have had a wish to sink this valuable article in the estimation of the medical world, by asserting, it to be destructive to the child, instead of attributing it, to an error in its exhibition or the ignorance of their own minds. Did we know this to be an established fact, how indiscreet would it be in a practitioner to administer the article under such circumstances, and indeed I should stile him nothing less than a licensed murderer, and deserving of the most severe chastisement.

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Were nothing else to attract our attention or solicit our interest for the retention of this article in practice or entitle it to a place in the Materia Medica, it should be that restraining alarming floodings, which seldom occurs after delivery, when it is made use of, owing no doubt to the forcible contraction it induces and by pressing of the Uterine fibres upon the mouths of the enlarged vessels on every side. And of course effectually restrained and its consequences avoided. The Professor of Midwifery in the University of Pennsylvania relates a case in his lectures of 1823 in which the after-pains were attributed to the administration of this Medicine by the mother, who had borne several Children without the Kno

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wledge of such pains; with the Doctor I must disagree in opinion, in believing that it was not the effect of the Ergot and that they were wrongly attributed to this article. To account for the supposed effects of this article as above cited, it is not very difficult, when we reflect, the quicker the process of parturition is finished, the slighter will they prove in general and particularly women with their first child and seldom troubled with after-pains, for the Uterus contracts more readily in the first confinement and consequently less so after each future labour, so they are more lia-

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ble to suffer from them in any succeeding delivery than in the first. If, however any such effects have been produced, they have never come within the limits of my observation; but on the contrary, I have always seen the happiest effects result from its use in that particular.

In Europe it has long been the prevailing opinion that bread made of grain containing a great quantity of the Secale Cornutum occasions a variety of disorders. Of these, the most interesting and common is the Dry gangrene, which is no longer left in doubt, as the fact is sufficiently proven in the experiments, made

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on fowls &c by Doct Charles Byrd of Virginia. The medical men of the army ascribed to bread vitiated with this substance as being the cause of the various bowel affections which prevailed at one time, among our troops on the Canadian frontier.

As an Emmenagoge this article would appear to have great claims, but by repeated trials made with the view of ascertaining whether it deserved a place among that class of medicines it has been found to possess no such powers and consequently not deserving the place assigned it. To accou

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=ticle as an emmenagogue is not
difficult, as amenorrhea depends
upon a wrong or perverted ac
=tion of the uterus, and to remov
which a steady and gradual
compression is necessary on that
viscus, so this article, from its
transitory effects as I have
stated above, is as little cal
=culated for that intention as
any of the Materia Medica.
It is supposed to be better
adapted to some of the forms
of dysmenorrhea from its prompt
and powerful action

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possible way. Within I have
gained my point of desti
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